How Deep Is Wollstonecraft’s Democracy?: Sexuality and the political theory of Mary Wollstonecraft

Abstract

In the face of a persistent tendency to (mis)interpret Mary Wollstonecraft as a simplistically liberal thinker, several scholars, most recently Daniel I. O’Neill, have attempted to recast her as an advocate of a more radically democratic political ideal. In this article, I call these attempts into question by foregrounding what I argue are the unacceptably shallow limits of Wollstonecraft's "deep democracy." These limits, I argue, are a product of Wollstonecraft’s highly restrictive views concerning sexuality, views that I show at work in her two novels as well as her most well known work, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.

Main body

In the face of a persistent tendency to (mis)interpret Mary Wollstonecraft as a simplistically liberal thinker,1 many scholars, most notably Virginia Sapiro,2 Barbara Taylor,3 and Virginia Muller,4 have endeavored to vindicate more nuanced interpretations. Most recently, Daniel O’Neill has drawn on Carole Pateman’s analysis of the “two-dimensional character” of rights claims to argue that Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (henceforth Rights of Woman) confounds as it employs the classical liberal discourse of rights.5 According to


O’Neill, the “revolution in female manners” that Wollstonecraft exhorts her readers to effect will require extending to women not only the basic package of civil and political rights guaranteed to men in the French Revolutionaries’ Declaration of the Rights of Man, but several additional rights as well, including a “right to publicly subsidized national coeducational institutions,” a right to compensation for their domestic labor, a right to full and equal access to employment beyond the domestic sphere, and “a right to financial assistance from the fathers of their children, regardless of whether those children were born in wedlock.” While each of these can justly be characterized as “first-dimension” rights, that is, “rights meant to uphold the freedom of citizens,” O’Neill astutely points out that, for Wollstonecraft, “the category of a purely first-dimensional rights claim simply did not exist.” In supplementing the “rights of man” with her proposed “rights of woman,” O’Neill argues, Wollstonecraft was out to do more than secure women’s formal recognition as citizens; she meant to strike a blow against men’s “second dimension rights,” that is, “rights that men enjoy by virtue of their sex” and, in doing so, upend the entire masculinist social order. Wollstonecraft’s concern with rights’ deeper, second-dimension effects leads O’Neill to conclude that she is best understood not as a “bourgeois liberal,” but as an advocate of a “radical transformation of political, economic, social, and gender relations” in the direction of an ideal O’Neill dubs “deep democracy.”

O’Neill’s portrait of Wollstonecraft as a radically democratic thinker is persuasive as far as it goes. However, my central contention in this article is that O’Neill’s analysis is, ultimately, 

9. O’Neill, Debate, 190; 10; 175.
incomplete because it neglects those portions of Wollstonecraft’s *oeuvre* and the “revolution in female manners” advocated throughout it that implicate sexuality. This aspect of Wollstonecraft’s work has been of particular interest to many contemporary feminist interpreters. Here, I employ the work of these scholars as well as my own readings of Wollstonecraft’s two novels, *Mary, A Fiction* and *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria,* and Wollstonecraft’s most well known non-fiction work, *Rights of Woman,* in an attempt to foreground sexuality in Wollstonecraft’s political theory. By way of conclusion, I draw on the often overlooked sexual dimension of Wollstonecraft’s “revolution in morals and manners” to call into question revisionist portraits of Wollstonecraft as an advocate of “deep democracy.”

**Sexuality in the political theory of Mary Wollstonecraft**

*Mary, A Fiction*

I begin my exploration of sexuality in the political theory of Mary Wollstonecraft with her first novel, or, as Wollstonecraft herself described it in the work’s title and advertisement, her first “fiction,” *Mary, A Fiction* (henceforth *Mary*). In this early work, I will argue,


11. In choosing to begin my exploration with *Mary,* I follow Claudia Johnson who argues that *Mary* “attempt[s] a boldness” that distinguishes it from Wollstonecraft’s earlier “relatively modest and conventional work” (*Cambridge Companion*, 207). I have also chosen to begin (as well as end) my analysis with Wollstonecraft’s novels because O’Neill, by his own admission, does not seriously engage with them, an omission that, perhaps, explains his inattentiveness to the sexual dimensions of Wollstonecraft’s political theory (*Debate*, 7).

12. Johnson suggests that Wollstonecraft’s eschewal of more conventional words to describe *Mary* such as “novel,” “romance,” or “tale” is revealing. Such “conventions,” Johnson writes, “implicate women in desires [Wollstonecraft] resists” (*Cambridge Companion*, 192).
Wollstonecraft conceives of sexuality, along with related concepts such as desire and the body, as problems or obstacles that must be overcome in the course of one woman’s struggle to attain and express “genius” or autonomous moral self-hood.¹³

The plot of Mary centers around one young woman’s struggle to evade and defy the conventions (especially marriage) that conspire to prevent women of her station from developing their native genius and leading genuinely autonomous and moral lives. In the work’s Advertisement, Wollstonecraft declares that her intention in writing Mary has been to place before her audience not another “Clarissa,” “Lady G—,” or “Sophie,” all beloved heroines of the popular fiction of Wollstonecraft’s day, but “the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers.”¹⁴ As Claudia Johnson has remarked, Wollstonecraft’s “implication here hardly needs spelling out: despite the memorable heroines of these novels and their enormous appeal to women and men alike, these novels somehow feature women who do not have ‘thinking powers of their own, but rather (presumably) only feeling powers, sensibilities that bind them closely to approval and disapproval of their communities and thus circumscribe them as independent moral agents.”¹⁵ Wollstonecraft’s Mary will not be, Wollstonecraft promises, an “echo” or a “copy”¹⁶ of such

13. My reading of Wollstonecraft’s first novel shares much with that proffered by Eileen Hunt Botting in Family Feuds: Wollstonecraft, Burke, and Rousseau on the Transformation of the Family (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006). According to Botting, in Mary, Wollstonecraft “views the patriarchal family, and the society it spawns, as a cave that traps humanity amid psychological delusion and moral corruption that can only be transcended by ascension to heaven, not attention to political reform” (Feuds, 137). I find this description, for the most part, apt. I would add to it only that, in Mary, Wollstonecraft ascribes “cave” status not merely to the patriarchal family and society, but to the desires, bodies, and sexualities that both ground and are grounded by them.

14. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 3.

puerile characters, and, as we shall see, that which will set her most apart will be her principled rejection of conventional feminine sexuality in favor of what both Wollstonecraft, the narrator, and Mary, the heroine, deem a more rarified ideal.

Wollstonecraft is true to the promise she makes in her novel’s Advertisement: the heroine she creates in *Mary* is, indeed, a far cry from Rousseau’s “beautiful, innocent…silly,” and, therefore, most “alluring and indulgent companion,” Sophie.¹⁷ Wollstonecraft makes this distinction clear by juxtaposing the bookish and curious Mary, whose mind, even as a child, we are told was continually “filled” with “sublime ideas,”¹⁸ with two characters who bear strong resemblances to the conventional literary heroines of Wollstonecraft’s day: Mary’s friend and first love, Ann, and her mother, Eliza.

Barbara Taylor aptly describes Ann as “a sweet-natured featherbrain.”¹⁹ Not unlike Rousseau’s Sophie, Wollstonecraft’s Ann is said to have “had a bewitching softness to her manners, a delicacy so truly feminine, that a man of any feeling could not behold her without wishing to chase her sorrows away.”²⁰ Ann, Wollstonecraft continues, was “timid and irresolute, and rather fond of dissipation… In everything it was not the great, but the beautiful, or the pretty, that caught [Ann’s] attention. And in composition, the polish of style, and harmony of numbers,

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17. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 162.
20. Wollstonecraft, *Mary and Wrongs*, 15. It seems that Ann was at least as irresistible to Mary, a woman of feeling if ever there was one, as she was to any such man. For instance, just after this passage, Wollstonecraft continues, “[Mary] wished so continually to have a home to receive [Ann] in, that it drove every other desire out of her mind; and, dwelling on the tender schemes which compassion and friendship dictated, she longed most ardently to put them in practice.”
interested her much more than the flights of genius, or abstracted speculations.”

Ann was also interested (actually, in Wollstonecraft’s words, “entirely engrossed”) by “one object,” the memory of her “ill-fated love” for a “young gentleman” who, in her youth, had “read to her, cultivated her taste, and stole imperceptibly her heart” only to forget her when circumstances changed. This early loss sapped Ann of whatever vitality and curiosity she may have had (“grief only had power to make her reflect,” Wollstonecraft writes) and left her little more than a slave to her fond remembrances, “play[ing] the tunes her lover admired, and handl[ing] the pencil he taught her to hold.”

Ann’s conventionally feminine personality is contrasted with Mary’s bold, adventurous, unconventional “genius.” Where Ann is described as soft and delicate, Mary is depicted “rambl[ing] about the garden” and trekking up “cloud-capt” mountains through “straggling trees and bushes” “where human foot seldom trod.” Where Ann is described as timid and irresolute, Mary is described as being, like her abusive father, “violent in her temper” and capable of “express[ing] contempt with such energy, that few could stand the flash of her eyes.” Where, in literature, Ann is attracted by the beautiful or the pretty, Mary prefers to “study authors whose works were addressed to her understanding.”

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24. Wollstonecraft, *Mary and Wrongs*, 7; 11-12; 8.


26. Wollstonecraft, *Mary and Wrongs*, 15. The contrast Wollstonecraft draws here between Mary and Ann parallels the contrast, commonplace in Wollstonecraft’s day, between the sublime and the beautiful. See Daniel I. O’Neill, “The Sublime, the Beautiful, and the Political in Burke’s
feeling with her weakness and melancholic affect, of Mary it is commented that “there was nothing alluring in her dress or manner,” and, in the course of the novel, she is depicted as causing at least one “man of feeling” to doubt “whether heaven was peopled with spirits masculine” and to forget “that he had called the [female] sex ‘the pretty play things that render life tolerable.’”\textsuperscript{27} Finally, where Ann’s earliest and only passion is for a “young gentleman” who is a friend of a “distant relation,” young Mary’s “sensibility,” Wollstonecraft writes, “prompted her to search for an object to love” but “on earth it was not to be found.”\textsuperscript{28} The “constant friends and confidants” of Mary’s youth are “the wandering spirits, which she imagined inhabited every part of nature.”\textsuperscript{29} These “features of Nature which she delighted to contemplate” soon prompted within young Mary “enthusiastic sentiments of devotion” for “her Creator,” “the Great First Cause.”\textsuperscript{30} “These propensities,” Wollstonecraft tells us, “gave colour to [Mary’s] mind, before the passions began to exercise their tyrannic sway, and particularly pointed out those which the soil would have a tendency to nurse.”\textsuperscript{31} Thus, “years after,” just as Ann would while away her lonely hours recalling memories of her young gentleman, so Mary’s “imagination,” Wollstonecraft writes, would stray “back, to trace the first placid sentiments [nature] inspired, and she would earnestly desire to gain the same peaceful tranquility.”\textsuperscript{32}


27. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 50.
29. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 8.
30. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 8-9; 13.
31. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 13.
32. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 13.
Wollstonecraft also contrasts Mary with another female character reminiscent of the more conventional literary heroines of Wollstonecraft’s day: Mary’s mother, Eliza. In her youth, Eliza was, in Wollstonecraft’s words, “a gentle, fashionable girl” who “carefully attended to the shews of things,” “acquiring a few superficial accomplishments, without having any taste for them.”

As a result of the desultory education she received throughout her girlhood, Eliza’s adult “opinions” are, Wollstonecraft tells us, little more than conventional “prejudices.” While Eliza is still young, she is “a mere machine,” and, with age, she is transformed into “a mere nothing” with a “countenance” marked by a “sickly, die-away languor” which, we are told by the narrator, “even rouge could not enliven,” and a “voice” that is “but the shadow of a sound.” Most disturbing to Wollstonecraft is Eliza’s penchant for “those most delightful substitutes for bodily dissipation, novels,” specifically “sentimental novels” which, Wollstonecraft tells us, she “perused with eagerness.” Such novels, in Wollstonecraft’s view, conspired with Eliza’s pitiable upbringing to upset the “natural… development of [her] passions” as evidenced by what Wollstonecraft takes to be her excessive fondness for her dogs which “shared her bed” and upon which she “bestowed… the warmest caresses” all the while leaving her children to the care of nurses and her husband to the “ruddy glow” of his “pretty tenants.”

Once again, the gulf separating the vapid and decadent Eliza from the brilliant and austere Mary could not be greater. Where Eliza is said to have no opinions, only prejudices,

34. Wollstonecraft, *Mary and Wrongs*, 5.
Mary, we are told, “had not any prejudices, for every opinion was examined before it was adopted.” Where Eliza is concerned with possessing only the simulacra of virtue and faith so that she might avoid the “dreaded and horrible place vulgarly called hell,” Mary is depicted “sitting up half the night, conversing the with Author of Nature,… perusing the scriptures, and discussing some points of doctrine which puzzled her,” and, at fifteen “eagerly desiring] to commemorate the dying love of her great benefactor” by taking communion for the first time. Finally, where Eliza’s passions and desires are so debased and corrupt that she prefers her novels to her husband and her dogs to her children, Mary, Wollstonecraft tell us, thinks “that only an infinite being could fill the human soul, and that when other objects were followed as a means of happiness, the delusion led to misery, the consequence of disappointment.” Mary’s “joys” and “ecstasies,” we are told, “arose from genius,” not from “the caprices of fancy” as do Eliza’s.

As is evident from Wollstonecraft’s juxtaposition of Mary to Ann and Eliza, what makes the heroine of *Mary* distinct from and superior to other eighteenth-century fictional heroines is her native inability to conform to conventional femininity, particularly the “bodily,” “animal,” torpid, and deadening desires associated with it. Each of the passions Mary experiences in the course of the novel, first for Nature, then for God, then for Ann, and, finally for Henry, a sensitive and disconsolate consumptive she meets while tending to Ann during her

40. Wollstonecraft, *Mary and Wrongs*, 13
convalescence in Portugal, is, in spite of its fervor and depth, unconsummated, and is also, without fail, described in terms intended to set it apart from the sexual and even the corporeal. For instance, at least twice in the novel, Mary’s friendship for Ann, which, we are told, “resembled a passion,” is distinguished from a “particular” or “prior” “attachment” of the kind that might account for the “disgust” and “horror” with which Mary regards the prospect of being united with her husband.\(^{43}\) At one point, Mary even goes so far as to describe her “affection” for Ann as “maternal.”\(^{44}\) Likewise, Mary’s relationship with Henry is figured primarily as a friendship bearing a distinctly paternal character.\(^{45}\) Were these relationships to take on a more carnal or erotic tinge, they would, in the view of Wollstonecraft, the narrator, as well as that of Mary, her heroine, be debased, thereby losing whatever appeal they may have had to an individual of Mary’s genus.

“Younger, Wollstonecraft has Mary confide to her journal during a period late in the novel when Mary is both evading her husband and awaiting a much-anticipated reunion with Henry in a village just outside of London, “is indeed the foundation of all our happiness; but these raptures are unknown to the depraved sensualist, who is only moved by what strikes his gross senses; the delicate embellishments of nature escape his notice; as do the gentle and interesting affections.”\(^{46}\) This passage expresses what one might call the moral of Mary: genuine

\(^{43}\) Wollstonecraft, *Mary and Wrongs*, 16; 20.

\(^{44}\) Wollstonecraft, *Mary and Wrongs*, 21.

\(^{45}\) When Henry comes to console Mary after Ann’s death, he asks permission to call her “friend” (*Mary and Wrongs*, 32). Mary responds, we are told, with “rapture” (*Mary and Wrongs*, 34). “He had called her his dear girl,” Wollstonecraft continues, “My child! His child, what an of association ideas! If I had had a father, such a father! – She could not dwell on the thoughts, the wishes which obtruded themselves. Her mind was unhinged, and passion unperceived filled her whole soul” (*Mary and Wrongs*, 34-35).
passion, pleasure, contentment, and freedom require a quasi-mystical transcendence of the bodily and the sexual. This moral is also given particularly vivid expression in the novel’s concluding lines. Here we find Mary still struggling against her marital yoke and longing for transport to “that world where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage,” where, as Mary told Henry as he lay dying, “comfort… with thee and Ann,” her eternal spiritual companions, awaits her.47

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

I shall now turn to an analysis of sexuality as it figures in Wollstonecraft’s most well known text, Rights of Woman. Taking Cora Kaplan’s perceptive and provocative interpretation of this text as my starting point, I will argue that Wollstonecraft’s Rights of Woman is suffused with a profound and deeply political concern with sexuality. As she did in Mary, in Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft conceives of sexuality, along with related concepts such as desire and the body, as problems or obstacles that must be overcome; however, in Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft is no longer concerned with the struggle of one single exceptional woman to overcome them. Rather, as Wollstonecraft states in the introduction to Rights of Woman, her intention in this text is to “speak of the sex in general,” not of the trials and travails of a lone female genius.48 Also, whereas, in Mary, the goal toward which the struggle against sexuality, desire, and the body ultimately aims is moral subjectivity, in Rights of Woman, the goal of this struggle is political subjectivity. In other words, Wollstonecraft’s animating concern in Rights of Woman is to demonstrate the possibility not of female “genius,” but of female citizenship. As we

46. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 50.
47. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 62; 56.
48. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 75.
shall see, the taming of sexuality is as crucial to this latter project as we have already seen it was to the former.

As Barbara Taylor has noted, despite its title, *Rights of Woman* is a text concerned less with rights than with “the question of female manners – their origins, character, consequences, and desperate need of reformation.”49 And, as Cora Kaplan has helpfully brought to light, many of the “female manners” with which Wollstonecraft is primarily concerned in *Rights of Woman* are sexual in nature. In *Rights of Woman*, Kaplan argues, Wollstonecraft portrays “sexuality and pleasure [as] narcotic inducements to a life of lubrious slavery,” as “sign[s] of [woman’s] degradation,” and as “site[s] and source[s] of women’s oppression.”50 Wollstonecraft’s goal is, of course, to change this state of affairs, to effect the “future revolution” she prophesies in chapter six of *Rights of Woman* when “love [will]… be purified in its own fires.”51 However, it is only by imagining, in the present, almost all women “crippled and twisted into sexual monsters by society as it is” that Wollstonecraft can, Kaplan argues, “hope to persuade her readers to abandon a gender specific and deforming education for femininity” and admit women as full and equal citizens to the polity envisaged by the leading lights of the French Revolution.52

In Kaplan’s view, it is this strategy that ultimately proves Wollstonecraft’s undoing. By “exaggerat[ing] the importance of the sensual in the everyday life of women,” “compulsive[ly]” associating women’s sexuality with “dirt, disease, decay and anarchic power,” and making “a reform in sexual behavior” a “precondition for radical change in the condition of women,”


52. Kaplan, *Sea Changes*, 44.
Kaplan believes Wollstonecraft “offers the reader a puritan sexual ethic” and “sets up heartbreaking conditions for women’s liberation – a little death, the death of desire, the death of female pleasure.”

While I find Kaplan’s reading of Rights of Woman illuminating in so far as it directs attention toward the text’s significant though often overlooked sexual dimensions, I do not believe it does justice to the nuanced and complex views concerning sex and sexuality Wollstonecraft presents here. According to Kaplan, Wollstonecraft theorizes a fundamental enmity between sexuality and women’s political freedom and demands that women renounce sexuality altogether for the sake of the attainment of political subjectivity. In my view, however, this reading overlooks much of what Wollstonecraft has to say regarding sex and sexuality throughout Rights of Woman. While Wollstonecraft certainly understands strenuous sexual reform to be a necessary handmaid or precursor to women’s civic empowerment, in Rights of Woman, she does not demand that women (or men for that matter) simply renounce sexuality or desire altogether. As Wollstonecraft herself writes, “to endeavor to reason love out of the world would be to out Quixote Cervantes.” “[B]ut,” Wollstonecraft continues, “an endeavor to restrain this tumultuous passion, and to prove that it should not be allowed to dethrone superior powers, or to usurp the scepter which the understanding should ever coolly wield, appears less wild.” Thus, Wollstonecraft’s aim in Rights of Woman is clear: she would not see sexual desire eradicated, only reformed, restricted and controlled, all in the name of genuine freedom, not only for women, but for men as well.

53. Kaplan, Sea Changes, 41; 36; 39.
54. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 93.
55. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 93.
Throughout *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft makes her dissatisfaction with the sexual morals and manners of the society she is out to revolutionize quite clear. Take the following passage, for instance. “The sensualist,” Wollstonecraft writes, “indeed, has been the most dangerous of tyrants, and women have been duped by their lovers, as princes by their ministers, whilst dreaming that they reigned over them.”56 Here, Wollstonecraft attributes women’s present subjugated state to the cunning of lecherous men who have conned them into bartering (under extremely unequal conditions, of course) the moral and political respect that is their divinely ordained birthright for sensual satisfaction. However, to avoid this fool’s bargain, Wollstonecraft does not exhort women to abstain from sex or eradicate sexual desire altogether. To the contrary, she calls on women to resist the snare of the sensualist by cultivating what she believes to be a more rational and respectable sexuality along the lines described in the following passage:

“Were women more rationally educated, could they take a more comprehensive view of things, they would be contented to love but once in their lives; and after marriage calmly let passion subside into friendship – into that tender intimacy, which is the best refuge from care; yet is built on such pure, still affections, that idle jealousies would not be allowed to disturb the discharge of the sober duties of life, or to engross the thoughts that ought to be otherwise employed.”57

As this passage makes clear, in Wollstonecraft’s view, a “rationally educated” woman capable of taking “a more comprehensive view of things” would not be without sexuality. Rather, her sexuality would be channeled and restrained such that “passion” would be prevented from interfering with “the sober duties of life.”

56. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 90.

Precisely what Wollstonecraft means by this phrase, “the sober duties of life,” is made clear by the still more vivid portrait of the sexuality of her ideal female citizen\textsuperscript{58} that Wollstonecraft paints in the ninth chapter of \textit{Rights of Woman}. Here, Wollstonecraft begins by specifying precisely what her feminine sexual ideal precludes. “[W]hen a woman is admired for her beauty, and suffers herself to be so far intoxicated by the admiration she receives, as to neglect to discharge the indispensable duty of a mother,” Wollstonecraft writes, “she sins against herself by neglecting to cultivate an affection that would equally tend to make her useful and happy.”\textsuperscript{59} In this passage, Wollstonecraft makes it clear that her feminine sexual ideal is tightly bound up with maternity. Indeed, it seems that, in Wollstonecraft’s view, the purpose of a woman’s sexuality, not to mention the key to her happiness, lies in her discharge of the “indispensable duty of a mother.” Women who foolishly eschew this duty and seek satisfaction through other means “sin against themselves” and are in need of sexual reformation.

Of course, it is important to emphasize that, in Wollstonecraft’s view, it is not only women’s sexualities that are in need of reformation. Throughout \textit{Rights of Woman}, Wollstonecraft is at continual pains to elucidate the shortcomings of men’s “morals and manners” as well as women’s. The following passage is exemplary. “Men,” Wollstonecraft writes, “are not aware of the misery they cause…, by only inciting women to render themselves pleasing; they do not consider that they thus make natural and artificial duties clash, by sacrificing the comfort and respectability of a woman’s life to voluptuous notions of beauty,

\textsuperscript{58} Despite her insistence that one ought not give “a sex to morals,” in \textit{Rights of Woman}, Wollstonecraft lays out distinct but complementary masculine and feminine sexual ideals for the citizens of her revolutionized polity (\textit{Vindication}, 102).

\textsuperscript{59} Wollstonecraft, \textit{Vindication}, 222.
when in nature they all harmonize.”60 Here, Wollstonecraft makes it clear that men who fail to respond to what is, in her view, the natural erotic appeal of a woman discharging her “natural,” which is to say, maternal, “duties,” fail to embody the masculine sexuality she believes vital to a just polity.

Moreover, as this passage also makes clear, in Wollstonecraft’s view, it is men who are responsible for initiating the sexual reforms, both masculine and feminine, that she advocates. “Men” are the “cause” of the “misery;” it is, therefore, their duty to lead the way in repairing it. Men who have “been rendered unnatural by early debauchery” must (re)learn, Wollstonecraft demands, to “feel more delight at seeing [their] child suckled by its mother, than the most artful wanton tricks could ever raise.”61 “The maternal solicitude of a reasonable and affectionate woman is very interesting,” Wollstonecraft insists, “and the chastened dignity with which a mother returns the caresses that she and her child receive from a father who has been fulfilling the serious duties of his station, is not only a respectable, but a beautiful sight.”62 Such a sight is, in fact, so beautiful in Wollstonecraft’s estimation that she composes the following eulogy in its honor:

“I have [often] viewed with pleasure a woman nursing her children, and discharging the duties of her station with, perhaps, merely a servant maid to take off her hands the servile part of the household business.63 I have seen her prepare

60. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 223.
61. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 223.
62. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 223.
63. Squaring the presence of a “servant maid” responsible for the “servile part” of housewifery in this scene with Wollstonecraft’s various railings against other inequalities of wealth and status is a difficult task that remains to be undertaken by those who laud Wollstonecraft as a radical egalitarian.
herself and children… to receive her husband, who returning weary home in the evening found smiling babes and a clean hearth. My heart has loitered in the midst of the group, and has even throbbed with sympathetic emotion, when the scraping of the well known foot has raised a pleasing tumult… [A] couple of this description, equally necessary and independent of each other, because each fulfill[s] the respective duties of their station, possesse[s] all that life [can] give.”

Only when men come to esteem such a scene in the manner and to the extent that Wollstonecraft herself seems to will women cease “to spurn” what Wollstonecraft calls the “natural way of cementing the matrimonial tie,” namely, motherhood. “[T]ill the manners of the times are changed, and formed on more reasonable principles,” Wollstonecraft writes, “it may be impossible to convince [women] that the illegitimate power, which they obtain, by degrading themselves, is a curse, and that they must return to nature and equality, if they wish to secure the placid satisfaction that unsophisticated affections impart.”

To sum up then, far from the bourgeois liberal various interpreters have made her out to be, the Wollstonecraft of Rights of Woman is concerned not principally with rights, but with “morals and manners,” namely, sexual morals and manners as she perceives these to be the linchpin of women’s social, economic, and political oppression. Because sexual morals and manners have such pride of place in her analysis of society’s ills, Wollstonecraft’s prescribed antidote centers on sexual reform, namely, limiting the sexual horizons of women (and, it is important to note, of men as well) to intramarital, or, at the very least, monogamous, procreative,

64. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 223-224.

65. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 223.

66. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 87.
abstemious, though, nonetheless, affectionate, heterosexual sex.67 Such a sexuality is, in
Wollstonecraft’s view, the only sexuality compatible with both the “duties” which nature has
established for both sexes and the social and political egalitarianism of which she is such a
passionate advocate.

*The Wrongs of Woman or Maria*

Having highlighted the conceptions of sexuality at work in Wollstonecraft’s first novel,
*Mary*, as well as in her most well known political treatise, *Rights of Woman*, I shall now turn my
attention to her final work, *Wrongs of Woman*, a novel left unfinished due to Wollstonecraft’s
untimely death. Much as she did in *Rights of Woman*, in *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft
construes sexuality as a crucial political problem. However, whereas in *Rights of Woman*
Wollstonecraft confidently presents reformed sexualities – one for men and another
complimentary one for women – as a kind of practical solution to the political problem posed by
sexuality, in *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft seems to have lost faith in this solution. In this
text, Wollstonecraft no longer seems to think the placid, affectionate, and egalitarian (in her
view, at least) friendships between men and women envisioned in both *Mary* and *Rights of
Woman* possible. In fact, in *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft presents heterosexual desire and

67. As did my reading of *Mary*, my reading of *Rights of Woman* resembles, in certain respects,
Botting’s. According to Botting, ”a fearless political optimism regarding the potential for reform
of the family, society, and government marks the middle stage of Wollstonecraft’s writings”
the linchpin for her hopes for the egalitarian transformation of society and politics” (*Feuds*, 172).
I also agree. Where my analysis differs from Botting’s is that I do not shy away from discussing
the fundamentally and explicitly sexual nature of the “reform” Wollstonecraft advocates in
*Rights of Woman*. This is not to say that Wollstonecraft is more concerned with reforming
sexuality than she is with reforming the family. It is to insist, rather, that, for Wollstonecraft, the
political importance of the family inheres, in part, in its function as a sexual regulatory apparatus.
In other words, Wollstonecraft’s concern with the family must be understood as bound up with
and inseparable from her concern with sexuality.
union, whether conventional as in Maria’s marriage to George Venables or radically unconventional as in Maria’s extra-marital relationship with her fellow asylum inmate Henry Darnford, as the irredeemable cause and locus of women’s oppression. Therefore, in Wollstonecraft’s final novel, women’s only hope for freedom (not to mention friendship, companionship, and support) is to renounce desire altogether and forge relationships with other women based on a kind of political solidarity. Thus, Wollstonecraft’s final word concerning sexuality appears to be as follows: While there is no resolving the political problem sexuality poses for women, women might seek some succor (though, it must be emphasized, certainly not any sort of sexual gratification) in the tender and steadfast fellowship of one another. 68

Wrongs of Woman is a novel steeped in despair. It opens in medias res with the tragic heroine, Maria, imprisoned four times over. The first prison confining Maria is a literal one, an

68. The reading of Wrongs of Woman I proffer here departs from both Mary Poovey’s and Botting’s and most closely resembles Claudia Johnson’s. Poovey suggests that, in Wrongs of Woman, Wollstonecraft ‘s presentation of sexuality is “self-contradictory” (Proper Lady, 110). “Wollstonecraft insists… on the importance of female sexual expression,” Poovey writes, “yet… every sexual relationship she depicts is dehumanizing and revolting” (Proper Lady, 110). In the end, Poovey believes that Wollstonecraft’s own identity was so “bound up with the values of [eighteenth-century bourgeois] institutions” that “she was unable to pursue her revolutionary insights to their logical conclusion” (Proper Lady, 96). I disagree. Rather, following Johnson, I argue that Wrongs of Woman unambiguously rejects what Poovey calls “eighteenth-century bourgeois institutions,” including marriage and virtually all other heterosocial/sexual relationships. Moreover, as Johnson has rightly noted, in this text, Wollstonecraft envisions a radical alternative to such bourgeois institutions: “solidarity and affective community amongst women” (Cambridge Companion, 204). Botting’s interpretation of Wrongs of Woman is similar to Poovey’s in that they both believe Wollstonecraft fails to articulate a possible means by which women might be delivered from the forces that oppress them. Botting believes that Wrongs of Woman embodies a “pessimistic protofeminism” that “lacks faith in the possibility of using political, legal, or providential means for the transcendence of human suffering, particularly the pain of women” (Feuds, 183). Again, I disagree. I think Wollstonecraft does struggle in this text to theorize something for women other than what she takes to be their present immiserated state. Botting’s analysis misses what I take to be the most significant aspect of Wrongs of Woman: its depiction of solidarity and affective community amongst women. My only criticism of Johnson’s interpretation of Wrongs of Woman is that it fails to emphasize the high cost Wollstonecraft believes women must pay for the balm of political solidarity: sexual desire and pleasure.
asylum in which she has been “buried alive” by her villainous husband, George Venables, so that he might gain control of Maria’s infant daughter and the last of Maria’s inheritance. Her second prison is also a quite literal one: her marriage to a loathsome man who has, in Maria’s words, “bastilled [her] for life.” The third prison confining Maria is more ineffable, though doubtlessly, in the course of the novel, as ruinous of her liberty and autonomy as either of the first two. This third prison has been aptly described by one interpreter as “the delusoriness of love.” It is this delusory love that yoked Maria in marriage to Venables in the first place, and it is this same delusory love that, as the novel progresses, threatens to bind her to yet another man, a recovering debauchee Maria meets and falls in love with during her confinement, Henry Darnford. The fourth, final, and most inescapable prison in which Wollstonecraft depicts Maria confined in is that of her sex. As Maria despondently writes to her infant daughter, whose very femaleness is a source of anxiety, grief, as well as defiant resolve for Maria throughout the novel, to be “born a woman” is to be “born to suffer;” it is to be “placed within the sweep of a whirlwind, from which it [is] next to impossible to escape.”

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70. Wollstonecraft, *Mary and Wrongs*, 137. *Wrongs of Woman* brims with descriptions of marriage that often take the form of carceral metaphors. Maria even goes so far as to compare marriage to being chained to a dead corpse (*Mary and Wrongs*, 146).
72. Maria’s description of the manner in which she came to love and marry Venables coupled with the narrator’s description of Maria committing the self-same error in regards to Darnford casts an aura of menace over heterosexual romance in any form that permeates the novel. Venables, Maria writes, “single[d] me out at the dance… and uttered expressions of unmeaning passion, to which I gave a meaning naturally suggested by the romantic turn of my thoughts” (*Mary and Wrongs*, 115). Of Maria’s initial encounter with Darnford, the narrator describes how Maria caught a shadowy glimpse of him and then used her “imagination to sketch the individual form she wished to recognize” (*Mary and Wrongs*, 81).
As the novel progresses from this most dismal of beginnings, Maria’s prospects vacillate from hopeless to hopeful and back again. For example, Maria begins the novel longing to be reunited with her infant daughter only to find out, thanks to a bit of reconnaissance engaged in on her behalf by her asylum-guard-turned-trusted-comrade, Jemima, that her daughter has died. However, in the lengthiest and most developed ending Wollstonecraft composed to the unfinished novel, Jemima discovers that Venables had deceived her regarding the death of Maria’s daughter and that the child is, in fact, alive. In this ending, mother and daughter are joyfully reunited by Jemima, who is figured as a second mother to Maria’s child.74 “The conflict is over! – I will live for my child!,”’’ Maria triumphantly declares in the final sentence of this ending, the only ending that Wollstonecraft imagined, it is worth noting, that might justly be described as happy.75

Over the course of Wrongs of Woman, Maria’s prospects regarding affective and physical heterosexual satisfaction also vacillate. Maria begins her life, we are told, “in one of the most romantic parts of England” where, during her impressionable youth, her beloved Uncle’s vivid stories of disappointed love instilled in her character some “peculiarities… which by the world are indefinitely called romantic.”76 Maria’s romantic cast of mind proves to be very nearly her undoing twice throughout the novel. It leads her first into the arms of Venables who, shortly after their marriage, reveals himself to be a true villain, interested solely in stealing Maria’s

73. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 159; 108.
74. During their journey back to Maria, Jemima, the narrator tells us, “had been tutoring” Maria’s daughter to utter the word “‘Mamma!’” (Mary and Wrongs, 177).

75. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 177. In one ending, Maria becomes pregnant by Darnford who then abandons her for a mistress. Wracked with despair, Maria loses the baby through miscarriage. In another ending, Maria commits suicide after learning of Darnford’s faithlessness.

76. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 111; 114.
inheritance. It is this unfortunate marriage to Venables, of course, that eventually lands Maria in the asylum where she meets and falls in love with the second man who nearly “Bastilles her for life.” The threat posed to Maria by her infatuation with her fellow-inmate, Henry Darnford, is plainly acknowledged by the narrator, but it is most vividly on display in the scene just prior to Maria’s escape from the asylum.

In this scene, Jemima informs Maria that the master of the asylum has suddenly left, never to return; this, Jemima urges, is their chance to effect the escape Maria has desperately contemplated since the opening scene of the novel and that Maria and Jemima mutually pledged to undertake together at the advent of their improbable friendship. While Jemima (as well as the reader) expect Maria to welcome the news that freedom is finally within her grasp, she reacts, the narrator tells us, by “sitting down… crossing her arms” and “mournfully” exclaiming, “‘But Darnford!... I have no child to go to and liberty has lost its sweets.’”78 Here we see that Maria’s delusory love for Darnford, who is revealed to be inconstant and duplicitous in each of the novel’s possible endings, has reduced her to one of those debased female creatures so vividly described in Rights of Woman who “hug their chains and fawn like the spaniel.”79 Fortunately for Maria, Jemima’s lifetime of mistreatment and abuse at the hands of men has inoculated her against such romantic foolishness, and, while Maria wallows, Jemima takes charge, informing

77. “With Darnford”, the narrator tells us, “[Maria] did not taste uninterrupted felicity; there was a volatility in his manner which often distressed her; but love gladdened the scene; besides he was the most tender, sympathizing creature in the world” (Mary and Wrongs, 168-169). And then, the narrator goes on to caution, “A fondness of the sex often gives an appearance of humanity to the behavior of men, who have small pretensions to the reality; and they seem to love others, when they are only pursuing their own gratification” (Mary and Wrongs, 169).

78. Wollstonecraft, Mary and Wrongs, 166.

79. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 155.
Maria what steps she must take to arrange for their departure. When the time comes, Jemima literally carries a confused and frightened Maria out of the asylum’s gate to freedom.

This scene of Maria’s and Jemima’s escape vividly embodies what I take to be Wollstonecraft’s final judgment regarding the compatibility of women’s sexuality and women’s freedom. In Wrongs of Woman, the best women can hope for, either sexually or politically, is to avoid becoming men’s hapless victims. “Bastilled for life” in miserable, unalterable, and deeply interrelated sexual and political circumstances, women, as Wollstonecraft figures them in Wrongs of Woman, can do nothing more or better than what Maria and Jemima, against nearly insurmountable odds and in only one possible ending, manage to do: band together to nurse one another’s wounds and, if they prove lucky enough to escape masculine clutches with them in tow, one another’s children.

**How Deep Is Wollstonecraft’s Democracy?**

In the preceding section of this article, I have struggled to bring into focus one aspect of Wollstonecraft’s political theory, its treatment(s) of sexuality, that, I believe, is often neglected in the course of what are otherwise impressively thorough readings of Wollstonecraft’s oeuvre. By way of conclusion, I would like to explore the implications these various theorizations of sexuality have for recent portrayals of Wollstonecraft as an advocate of “deep democracy.”

In The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, civilization, and democracy, Daniel O’Neill proffers a revealing examination of Wollstonecraft’s political theory in the heat and light generated by her conflict with Edmund Burke over the nature and significance of the French Revolution. “[I]f modern feminism began with Mary Wollstonecraft,” O’Neill writes, summing up his central interpretive claim concerning Wollstonecraft, “it began in an attempt to link the
progress of civilization with the march of democracy.” Wollstonecraft “took issue,” O’Neill explains, “with Burke’s conviction that social, political, sexual, and other inequalities were part of the natural order of things, and argued that all such hierarchies had to be wholly razed and reconstructed on the basis of democratic equality.” Of Rights of Woman O’Neill writes, “Wollstonecraft [here] turned her attention specifically to how the old European system of manners had affected women, and urged a ‘revolution in female manners,’” which, O’Neill insists, “necessitated the thorough democratization of political, economic, social, and gender relations…” In other words, on O’Neill’s account, Wollstonecraft did not argue for the simple “extension of the ‘rights of man’ to women in the public sphere, but rather [for] the spread of democracy into all aspects of human existence,” a form of democracy O’Neill dubs “deep democracy.”

While I agree with O’Neill that Wollstonecraft’s thoroughgoing egalitarianism certainly exceeds the bounds of liberalism and marks a stark contrast between her and Edmund Burke, I am reluctant to join him in celebrating, without qualification, the depth of the democracy she envisions. I am specifically reluctant to endorse his statements that Wollstonecraft favored “the spread of democracy into all aspects of human existence” and that she “argued that all [social, political, sexual, and other] such hierarchies had to be wholly razed and reconstructed on the basis of democratic equality.” My reluctance arises from my attentiveness to the sexual dimensions of Wollstonecraft’s political theory, specifically, to the restrictive sexual prescriptions that, I have shown, Wollstonecraft advocates throughout her writings.

82. O’Neill, Debate, 18.
In *Mary*, Wollstonecraft theorizes sexuality as a problem afflicting exceptional women of
genius, and, in doing so, sets up all expressions or enactments of sexuality, excepting, perhaps,
the most abstract, denied, and disavowed, as incompatible with moral excellence, autonomy, and
respect. In *Rights of Woman*, expressions or enactments of sexuality that do not conform to the
intramarital, or, at the very least, monogamous, procreative, abstemious and heterosexual model
Wollstonecraft idealizes are deemed not only incompatible with, but inimical to happiness,
freedom, rationality, virtue, and, most significantly, women’s full and equal citizenship. In
*Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft pits women’s desire for sexual or romantic fulfillment against
their desire for liberty and autonomy, effectively placing women in a tragic double bind in which
they must choose between pleasure on the one hand and freedom on the other.

Would O’Neill or any other interpreter eager to celebrate Wollstonecraft as a theorist of
“deep democracy” be prepared to defend any of these theorizations of sexuality as democratic? Is
a theorization of sexuality as incompatible with autonomy and respect such as the one
Wollstonecraft offers in *Mary* a democratic theorization? I would suggest that, no, it is not. Even
if one were to excuse its obvious elitism, such a theorization runs the risk of stigmatizing sex,
desire, the body, and other related topics (e.g. sexually transmitted disease, birth control, rape,
sexual abuse, social and civil rights of sexual minorities, abortion, pornography, affordable
access to child care, etc.) to such an extent that they are effectively barred from political
discussion in a most undemocratic way.

What about a theorization of sexuality that sets up a monogamous, procreative, and
deeply gendered sexuality as a prerequisite for the attainment of political goods like social and
economic equality and full citizenship such as Wollstonecraft offers in *Rights of Woman*? I hope
it goes without saying that such a theorization is anti-democratic in the extreme. Not only does it
invite the castigation, marginalization, and exclusion of individuals who deviate from its sanctioned politically desirable sexuality, but one could easily imagine a polity framed in accordance with such a theorization criminalizing adultery, prostitution, or all pre- or extra-marital sex, restricting or prohibiting access to abortion or birth control, restricting, prohibiting, or attempting to eradicate through either punitive or medical means homosexuality or other “queer” or minority sexualities, or pursuing any number of other profoundly anti-democratic policies aimed at normalizing the sexually deviant in the name of freedom and equality.84

And, what about the final theorization of sexuality to be found in Wollstonecraft’s oeuvre, a theorization that construes sex and sexual desire as ever-present threats to women’s freedom and that portrays all women as potential victims and all men as, at best, capricious and manipulative, and, at worst, abusive predators? The politics that would be the handmaid of a theorization such as this are easy, though not pleasant, to imagine: they would center on the restraint of men, of course, but also, simultaneously, on the restraint of women, although this would doubtlessly be figured not as “restraint” but as “protection.” A politics such as this, which divides the polity into two arbitrary, rigid, and inescapable castes, one of predators and one of victims, and then seeks to radically curtail the freedom of both of them can hardly in good conscience be called democratic.

84. In this context, it should be borne in mind that, while Wollstonecraft sought to improve the standing of unmarried mothers by legally obliging a man who “seduces a woman… to maintain the woman and her children,” she also insisted that “these women should not… be termed wives, or the very purpose of marriage would be subverted” (Vindication, 142). “The woman who is faithful to the father of her children demands respect, and should not be treated like a prostitute,” Wollstonecraft writes, but neither should she be treated like a wife (Vindication, 142). Portrayals of Wollstonecraft as a radical egalitarian fail to reckon with the fact that what she calls for here is not an utter dismantling of the sexual hierarchy that divides women into the virtuous and the “fallen,” but for the legal construction of a more nuanced hierarchy that designates some women superior to prostitutes, but inferior to wives.
To the foregoing appraisal of the insufficiency of Wollstonecraft’s “democratic” ideal, one might imagine the following objection: Granted, Wollstonecraft does not attend to sexuality in a manner that comports with our contemporary sensibilities. However, this “failure” – to the extent that it makes any sense to describe it as such – is hardly cause for criticism.

Wollstonecraft was, after all, writing in the 1790s, nearly a century before the advent of the term “homosexual” and the concomitant bout of sexual speciation that gave rise to the modern sexual subjects (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer people) vying for inclusion in today’s democratic polities. Therefore, in criticizing Wollstonecraft’s views concerning sexuality as insufficiently democratic, am I not perpetrating a kind of historical absurdity? Moreover, am I not giving short shrift to (or possibly eliding altogether) what interpreters such as O’Neill have persuasively shown to be Wollstonecraft’s principal political project: the inclusion of women in a democratic imaginary?

Because I am, by and large, sympathetic to the historical concerns animating this objection, in this article, I have deliberately avoided mounting a critique of the “Wollstonecraft-would-have-turned-out-better-work-if-she-had-had-a-word-processor-or-a-microwave-oven” variety. In other words, by calling attention to the questionable democratic character of Wollstonecraft’s views concerning sexuality, I do not seek to chastise Wollstonecraft for failing to anticipate the emergence of various modern sexual subjects, sensibilities, or technologies (e.g. effective and accessible contraception). Rather, my aim in this article is simply to suggest that a political ideal premised on the notion that only those people who engage in sex in a particular way at a particular time for particular reasons and with a particular amount of reticence are worthy of citizenship (not to mention respect) is not a deeply democratic political ideal.

Wollstonecraft's world most certainly was not peopled by heterosexual, homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, etc. subjects, but it was, on her account, at least, peopled by rakes, coquettes, libertines, and sensualists whose sexual desires and behaviors, in her view, impeded social, moral, and political progress, including, first and foremost, the inclusion of women in public life. While such an account is democratic in so far as it strives to include (some) women, it is anti-democratic in so far as it effects this inclusion at the expense of a whole host of others whom Wollstonecraft considers sexual miscreants.

Now, in making this observation, I do not mean to diminish Wollstonecraft’s legacy as one of the first political thinkers to include women within the ambit of democratic politics and, thus, as one of the most radical egalitarians of her age. Rather, what I mean to do is underscore for contemporary readers the fact that Wollstonecraft’s radical egalitarianism is bought at a price, namely, sexual diversity, and, in some cases, sexual desire altogether. The feminist movement, I would argue, still labors (and quarrels and founders) under the shadow of this unfortunate (though, in Wollstonecraft's time, probably unavoidable) bargain. Of course, one of the benefits of Wollstonecraft’s work to the present is that it can suggest to us, if we let it, the possibility that, today, this particular bargain need not be struck. Unqualified celebrations of Wollstonecraft’s

86. While such modern sexual subjects were unknown to Wollstonecraft, same-sex desire and sexual activity were most certainly not. For instance, in Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft expresses concern about the “nasty tricks” girls learn from one another when they “sleep in the same room, and wash together” in nurseries, boarding schools, and convents (Vindication, 204-206). Wollstonecraft was not alone in her concern about same-sex sexual activity at girls’ boarding schools in the late eighteenth century. In fact, such activity was often featured in the pornography of Wollstonecraft’s day. See Katherine Binninger, “The ‘Singular Propensity’ of Sensibility’s Extremities: Female Same-Sex Desire and the Eroticization of Pain in Late-Eighteenth Century British Culture,” GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 9(4): 471-498. On the powerful role that the figure of the “sapphist” played in the cultural imaginary of late-eighteenth-century Britain, see Terry Castle, The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) and Lisa L. Moore, Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
“deeply democratic” political vision risk occluding such vital opportunities to rethink and reimagine the relationships between gender, sexuality, and democracy.